

Borne the Battle

Episode # 231

Army Veteran Dawn Halfaker, Combat Wounded Amputee, CEO of Halfaker and Associates

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(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:06] Opening Monologue:

Tanner Iskra: Oh, let's get it. Monday, March 1st, 2021 Borne the Battle brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the podcast that focuses on inspiring veteran stories and puts a highlight on important resources, offices, and benefits for our veterans. I'm your host, Marine Corps veteran Tanner Iskra. Hope you had a great week outside of Podcast Land. Taxes should be done here in the Iskra household by this time this episode drops. So, I'm excited for that. Before we get into our normal routine here at Borne the Battle, got a couple of things to clue you in on first. First one is, yes, we did lock in Secretary McDonough for a future episode of Borne the Battle. So, again, if you have a question on overarching policy or anything big picture wise at the VA that you want me to ask the Secretary, please email me by—heck, as soon as you hear this—to podcast@va.gov. Email me your question, got a quick turnaround to make this happen, and if you email me in time I will ask the Secretary. Got a few that already came in, I'm just looking for one or two more. Also, recently the Under Secretary for the Veterans Health Administration, Dr. Stone, recently testified on Capital Hill to the House Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies about the department's COVID-19 response. And he had a couple of different comments that I thought were interesting and that I wanted to share with you. They're two comments put together to give you, I think, a good picture of what the committee discussed. So, without further ado, here they are: "And because of the hard work of researchers who developed the vaccine with the substantial contributions from the VA research community as well as the specialists, logistics, and

pharmacies that are getting the vaccines distributed and prepared as quickly as possible to our nearly three hundred vaccination sites. VA has administered over 1.3 million doses of vaccines to veterans thus far. And over one million veterans have received their first dose. We've also vaccinated over 275,000 VA employees, most of whom are frontline healthcare workers. Finally, we've vaccinated nearly 10,000 essential, public-facing employees of other federal agencies. With the current limited supply of vaccines we remain focused on vaccinating the most vulnerable veterans that are enrolled in VA healthcare. Although we would like to start vaccinating a broader group of veterans now, we do not yet have the supply to do that. But as supply increases, we are ready. VA has built a system with substantial capacity to deliver vaccines well beyond our current supply throughout the country. In fact, we are currently delivering virtually all of the doses that we receive each week within days of receiving it. Throughout this pandemic we've worked to simultaneously provide VA patients with the best possible care for COVID-19 and their other medical needs." "In communities of color, we are actually exceeding what we are in the white population of America. And I'm really pleased at how black and Hispanic veterans are accepting the vaccine across the nation." Later on and throughout the testimony, Dr. Stone then lays out where current inequities do lie are actually urban versus rural and hybrid rural communities and the ways that the health administration is currently looking to mitigate reaching out to those rural veterans. To listen to the entire testimony, you can go to the House Appropriations Committee's YouTube page. It's right there. Find it. Click play. Received a couple ratings, and even though I can't see it on our computers or on our apps here in the United States, we have one review as one came in from Norway. And you can apparently only see this on Norway's version of Apple Podcasts. I don't know. I saw it last week in another app that I track. I've been waiting for it to post on Apple Podcasts, but it never has posted. So, I'm assuming that you can only see it on Norway's ISP. Anyways, the review comes in from Justin G. Y. "Five stars. Great info. This program gives veterans good information needed for a far too complex agency. Hopefully the VA starts working to leverage other technologies to make filling paperwork and submit

paperwork via secure sites.” I completely understand your sentiment, Justin. When a government agency and/or a Fortune 500 company gets to a certain level, a certain size, there's a lot of stuff that goes unnoticed or gets lost in the shuffle. And again, it happens with so many companies, so many large companies, and you have to look at the VA and take it for what it is, which is the largest healthcare provider in the country. And trust me, I hate it when we see a negative experience for a veteran at a VA facility or in the VA system much like we all hated seeing any negative experiences in our respective services happening to another Marine, say were Soldier or Airman or Coastie. And when something happens, I do want to see accountability. I do want to see rectifications to get it fixed. Whether it benefits healthcare or a cemetery, nobody wants to see a veteran have a negative experience here at the VA. Nobody. Absolutely, no one. And if something does happen, we don't want to see it get repeated either. We want the problem identified and fixed. I mean, many of us in the trenches here at the VA, are veterans ourselves. My mission through the episodes like last week's benefits breakdown episode is to wade through all of that and to navigate through what I can and to report back to you, the listener. And I don't know anything about sites being not secure. All I know, Justin, is that wherever you sent your review in from, it was pretty secure because I still can't see it anywhere in my office other than one app that tracks like global reviews. So, good job there. I appreciate the review. As always, I appreciate the feedback every week. If you're so inclined, please feel free to leave a review just like Justin did on Apple Podcasts. It's a good way to communicate directly with our podcast here and help get Borne the Battle recognized by more veterans in Podcast Land at the same time. News releases, I've got one real news release this week for you. It's about a change in how muscular skeletal and muscle injuries are rated for veterans disability compensation. That is huge. So huge that our digital team in our office wrote up a blog for it on blogs.va.gov. That does a bit of a deeper dive on that subject about the changes and why it's important. You'll find it at vantage point, just go to blogs.va.gov [Link: blogs.va.gov/VAntage/85156/va-updates-rating-criteria-musculoskeletal-muscle-injuries/]]. And if it's still not on the main page, just type in some keywords in the search bar that's on VAntage Point like “muscular skeletal”

and/or “disability rating,” and you'll find it. Okay. And the news release, itself, it says, “For immediate release: The musculoskeletal and muscle injuries portion of the Department of Veterans Affairs VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities, otherwise known as VASRD, has been revised to reflect updated medical information used to assess Veterans’ medical records and determine their VA disability rating. The revision, effective February 7th, ensures that this portion of the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities uses current medical terminology by removing obsolete conditions, clarifying ambiguities, and providing detailed and updated criteria for the evaluation of musculoskeletal and muscle injury disabilities, including adding conditions that previously did not have diagnostic codes. Claims for musculoskeletal and/or muscle injury conditions adjudicated after February 7th of this year, but were pending on the effective date, will be considered under both the old and new rating criteria, and whichever criteria is more favorable to the Veteran will be applied. Claims filed on or after the effective date will be rated under the new criteria. To learn about the complete list of updates go to benefits.va.gov/warms/bookc.asp [Link: <https://benefits.va.gov/warms/bookc.asp>].” So again, benefits.va.gov/warms/bookc.asp. And you can find the codes and write-ups on every recognized disability in the VA’s schedule for rating disabilities. It’s the big rating disability book. In addition, veterans with questions regarding this VA schedule for ratings, disability updates, they may contact VA directly at +1-800-827-1000. All right. As of this drop, it is the first day of Women's History Month, and I want to introduce you to an amazing female veteran. She went to West Point where she was on the basketball team. She's an Army combat wounded veteran amputee. She then interned on Capitol Hill here in D.C. before starting working for DARPA, like the advanced research, really cool stuff, and is now the CEO of Halfaker and Associates. With over 600 employees, and over half of those employees are veterans, she's been featured in Inc., HBO, CNN, CBS, and was recently recognized as one of the top 10 healthcare execs to watch in 2020 for her company's work in machine learning, which I wish I would've done a better look into because machine learning has ties to some of our previous guests like Microsoft’s Danny Chung and OpLign’s Alex Calfree. I digress. Without further ado, I bring to you Army veteran Dawn Halfaker. Enjoy.

[00:11:33] Music

[00:11:39] Interview:

Tanner Iskra (TI): You know, I got to tell you the first time that I've- this is the first time I've interviewed anybody in person in almost a year. I think it was it was Darlene Iskra, no relation whatsoever, but she was the first woman to ever command a ship in the Navy.

Dawn Halfaker (DH): Oh wow.

(TI): And so, I was like, I mean, my last name is Iskra; I have to interview her. And she came from Seattle, and I'm from Seattle myself.

(DH): Oh, no kidding.

(TI): So, yeah. So, if you actually look into that episode, it's like: "Are we related? Are we not?" And we kind of went down that path a little bit, but no, this is the first interview I've had since then.

(DH): Wow.

(TI): Like in person, I think that was March.

(DH): Yeah. It's crazy.

(TI): Times with COVID.

(DH): Times with COVID.

(TI): But we're six feet away. We're making it happen. Dawn, the first thing I want to ask is, and it's the first question I ask every guest here on *Borne the Battle* is when did you know that military service was the next step in your path?

(DH): Yeah, I mean, for me it happened pretty quickly. I was in high school. I was a basketball player and was fortunate enough to be just good enough, not great, but to be recruited by a few different schools.

(TI): That's pretty good.

(DH): Well, I mean, we're not talking like Georgetown or something, right? I was- but I did get recruited. And so, as part of the NCAA, kind of recruiting process, you can do

five, what they call official paid visits to these schools. And so, one of the schools that was recruiting me was West point. And I wasn't really familiar with the academies. I grew up in San Diego, California- Navy town, right? So, I was, everyone was like, "Why are you looking at the Army?" And so, anyway, I decided that I wanted to go check it out, and it was the first school I went to. And quite frankly, fell in love with it when I saw it.

(TI): I can only imagine.

(DH): I mean, it's a beautiful campus. And really, I think what struck me were the people there and talking to the other cadets and just really recognizing that they had a sense of purpose. There was something meaningful about what they were doing and why they were doing it. And I just remember thinking like, "Wow, this is a fit. This feels like the right place for me." And so, I never looked back.

(TI): What position do you play?

(DH): I was a guard. So, sort of a shooting guard, mostly, that didn't shoot great.

[Laughter]

(TI): You shot well enough to get to college. That's, I mean, I didn't even make the JV team in high school, so I turned to wrestling. So, what years did you go?

(DH): So, I went off in '97, graduated from my high school reported to West Point what they call "R Day," reception day, in, I don't know, June of, probably, June of yeah, June of '97, and I graduated in 2001, just a couple months before 9/11.

(TI): Oh, so you were still going through your school training?

(DH): I was, yes. I was going through my training. We were out in the field, so we didn't really hear the news right away. And then sort of somehow started to make its way out to us. And yes, it was crazy.

(TI): Absolutely.

(DH): Everything changed overnight.

- (TI): Absolutely. Pivoting back to West Point. I did interview Mike Erwin and I did listen to your interview on Eagle nation. And I didn't know you were his platoon leader? Is that what it was?
- (DH): I think it was squad leader. And it's funny because like, I was probably not the greatest squad leader. I was what they call like a core squad athlete at West point, you know? 'Cause I was playing basketball, so I wasn't always around a lot. And so, I was kind of embarrassed. Like, Mike's like, "Yeah, you were my squad leader." I'm like, "Was I?" Like, "Was I terrible?" And he's like, "Oh no, no, no, you were fine. You were fine." I was like, "Okay." But, you know, of course, Mike was great. So, he stayed out of trouble. I used core squad as well, so he stayed out of trouble.
- (TI): Yeah. He came out to the VA in last year, I think, and it's in the archives. If you look at the *Borne the Battle* archives, but he talked about team RWB and what he's doing over there and all that good stuff that they're doing. So, if you get a chance and, you know, in the time of COVID, it's a good episode to check out.
- (DH): I sure will. Mike's a great guy. I love it. Love his work.
- (TI): Yep, absolutely. Okay so, military police officer, South Korea, Kuwait, Iraq. And Iraq in 2004 you went on patrol, you were wounded during a combat patrol, Purple Heart and a Bronze Star. Is that a day that you'd be willing to share?
- (DH): Yeah. Yeah, let's do it.
- (TI): Okay.
- (DH): Yeah. So, like you said, I was on a routine patrol. We were required to kind of patrol a specific area where they were- one of the adjacent units was having a big operation where they were trying to flush out some insurgent activity in the city and that we were in. And so-
- (TI): What city?
- (DH): Baquba. So, it was right on the edge of the Sunni Triangle, about 35 kilometers northeast of Baghdad. Really diverse area. Lot of activity close to the yellow line,

the Kurdish area. So, just all kinds of influences there. So, it was a pretty hot area when I was there. Evidenced by what happened with me. And so, I went out with one of my squads again, fairly routine patrol and unfortunately drove into an ambush and was on the wrong end of one of the rocket propelled grenades that came through. My Humvee hit me in the shoulder. Hit me, hit another soldier right in the arm as well. Severed my arm and caused a lot of other pretty significant and life-changing injuries. Last thing I remember from that night, well, it was technically the morning. But I think it was around three in the morning, so it was dark. But I remember things were just eerily quiet and all of a sudden, just with one flash, my life changed. And the last thing I remember was being- the feeling of being airlifted up into the air thinking, "Is this it?" Like, "Is my life over?" And luckily it wasn't.

(TI): Yeah. So, obviously your tour of duty was over at that point. This was back in 2004, right?

(DH): 2004, yeah.

(TI): How much recovery time did you have?

(DH): So, I got to Walter Reed about- Walter Reed Army Medical Center in DC- about probably a week after I got injured. So, again, that whole process of getting you off the front lines to the combat support hospital, to Landstuhl Germany, to Walter Reed, one of the largest military treatment facilities. Impeccable. Flawless. Like nothing we've ever seen in our lifetimes in terms of medical care. And so, luckily got there very quickly. I wasn't-

(TI): Is that the first time you remember anything from like the helicopter and then Walter Reed?

(DH): Yep. So, remember the helicopter, and then about two weeks later, remember waking up from a coma. And so, I was, it took me about a week to get back and then I was in a coma for about another week, as things were pretty touch and go with me. And then the first thing I remember as they started to wake me up, lowered the sedation meds was seeing my dad, which was sort of weird because I was still in that moment where I had left. I was still in Iraq. I was still lying on the dirt thinking, that my

soldiers were, I remember them looking over me. And I remember the looks on their faces. So, I knew I was pretty messed up, but that's sort of the moment I was in. And I was like, "How the hell did my dad get to Iraq?" Like, leave it to my parents. And so, that was kind of the moment I remember. But it was also the moment where I was, still, I knew my arm had been severely damaged. I did not know that it had been severed. And so, I remember looking at my dad and I remember thinking, "Just don't let them take my arm, Dad. Don't let him take my arm." And, he had to look at me and he's like, you know. So, I remember he looked at me, I looked over, and I saw a white bandage where my arm used to be. And I was just like, "Wow." I thought my life was over.

(TI): Yeah. Obviously, like you kind of alluded to, obviously a dark day or two and recovery. And that's a lot of places that our brothers and sisters sometimes stay, unfortunately. How did you come out of that?

(DH): Yeah, you know, it's interesting. It definitely- a couple dark days. I feel like I was very lucky to have a lot of support around me early. But still, I mean, I think it's a process that we all kind of have to go through on our own in some way, shape or form, even if you have people around you. And I remember at the beginning, it was really hard. I had a lot of- I didn't want to believe that it happened. So, I actually, I mean, it's crazy thinking back, and I'm a little embarrassed to share this, but I remember telling my mom, "Just cover up the mirrors in the bathroom in the hospital room." Because I didn't want to see it. I didn't want to acknowledge it. And I think it's probably part of the grieving process, right? Like, I didn't want to accept that that happened. But slowly but surely, I had to get out of bed. And I actually kind of had to learn to walk again, believe it or not. It took me a little while before I was kind of able to get up. I had still a lot of wounds that I was sort of nursing, a lot of broken bones. I had- my lungs had collapsed, I had a chest tube in. So, it was definitely a new reality. But I think that for me, the turning point was really when I finally got out of my hospital room and started to kind of make my way to other parts of the hospital where I ran into some of these other wounded warriors. And there was one specific

moment where I somehow mentally flipped that switch. It was a moment and a person. I actually went down to the PT clinic for the first time. Now this is like the clinic at Walter Reed at the time where all the wounded warriors are going. Missing limbs, burns, missing eyes, just all kinds of crazy injuries. And I actually, I'd been sitting up there in my room feeling sorry for myself, but I got to see this staff sergeant- he was a staff sergeant at the time. Get up on- he was missing both legs, he had some facial burns, and his family was there. And I got to see him get up on his legs, his prosthetic legs, for the first time and take a step. And that was really powerful. It was like, wow. Like, he's doing this, you know. And you could tell it was a struggle. I mean, it was hard for him. And his family was cheering him on, his kids were there. So, I was like, wow. Like, it was very inspiring, and it really just helped me understand well A: there's a lot- a lot of these warriors are worse off than I am, and they're out here doing it. And I didn't want to let them down, you know? And so, it really became this kind of, band of brothers, band of sisters mentality of like, "Hey, we're in this together." And they were very encouraging and very inspiring. But yeah, that was really the moment where I'm like, "All right, I'm not going to sit here and feel sorry for myself. If he can do it, I can do it." The good news was, is we could- we were working through things together in many cases, and there were a few female wounded warriors, which was interesting. There weren't too many women who, particularly amputees.

(TI): Sure.

(DH): And so, we kind of band together a little bit. And it was great. In fact, Melissa Stockwell was one of the first people I met. She's now a Paralympic athlete and a bronze medal winner from the most recent games. I mean, just, these women have gone on to do amazing things. We were all injured right around the same time, but it's been this bond that we've had. We helped each other out at the hospital. Tammy Duckworth was there- Senator Duckworth now. I mean, just, they were inspiring, they were supportive. You get to know their families. And we were all just kind of able to help each other out. Danielle Green who actually works for the VA. Notre

Dame basketball player, so her and I had a lot in common. I mean, just a great group of people and it really, I think, is that sort of warrior spirit is what helped us, I think, all pull together and be able to move on.

(TI): How long were you at Walter Reed?

(DH): I was at Walter Reed for about 10 months. Not inpatient the whole time. I was inpatient for a couple of months, and then I was living at the Fisher House there.

(TI): Good. Very good. Now, what year were you discharged?

(DH): So, I got discharged in 2005. So, just about a year after I got injured.

(TI): You're an entrepreneur now, but that isn't where you started your civilian career. You interned as a military liaison to the House Armed Services Committee, where you advised the Chair on DOD legislation, military health, and veterans' issues. Being a liaison for that, for the chair of the Armed Services Committee, how does an opportunity like that come about? That's not a normal thing.

(DH): Yeah. I feel like my bio may be a little bit inflated on that. No. And when we say advising, I got to sit in the room. No, but actually it was kind of interesting. I was in the hospital recovering at Walter Reed, and one of the members of Congress, Duncan Hunter at the time, who was chair of the Armed Services Committee, came into my hospital room. And he was making the rounds and shaking hands and thanking us for our service, for our sacrifices. And so, he came in and he's like, "Well, what are you going to do?" And I said, "I don't know." And he's like, "Well, hey, come down to my office a few days a week, and we'll put you to work." He's kind of joking. And I was like, "Oh, that sounds interesting." So, I took him up on it. And I was like, I'm not just going to sit around. And so-

(TI): Was he surprised that you took him up on it?

(DH): Probably, I don't know.

[Laughter]

(DH): But he put me to work, that's for sure. So, he started going down to the Hill a few days a week, but when he was Chairman, it was interesting. I had done a stint in Korea and when there were some issues that he was dealing with, that the DOD was dealing with, related to some behavior and things that were happening over in Korea at the time that were not good, weren't healthy for our service members. And so, there were some committee hearings about that. And so, I actually knew firsthand what they were talking about, the issues they were dealing with. So, that's just kind of an example I was able to provide some insights to these members on some of these key issues. So, but that was really the extent of it.

(TI): I used to record those hearings back, oh man, probably 10 years ago now. Both Armed Services Committee hearings, both the Senate and the House, whenever the Commandant or the Assistant Common or the Sergeant Major Marine Corps would testify. And, to your point, if you pay attention to those hearings, you learn so much about the DOD capacity, budgets, manpower, equipment, and you get to learn both the priorities, both of the DOD and of Congress. And sometimes they don't always line up. I got my own memories of that time and some of those hearings without naming any names or parties, because this is a government podcast and we are apolitical, you got a story?

(DH): Do I have a story?

(TI): Is there something that you witnessed? You're like, huh?

(DH): I remember...I mean, the only thing that I can say is I just- I don't know that I have any great stories. I remember four-star generals going in and out just on a recurring basis. And for a young captain, I'm sitting over in the cube in a corner, basically just trying to keep my mouth shut and not embarrass anybody, responding to letters from constituents. And so, you're dealing with this, and then you see these four-star generals kind of walking in and out. And sometimes, it would get a little animated in the office. I never really knew exactly what was going on, but I do remember there were a lot of issues. They were, I mean, these were really pertinent issues. We

were at war. I mean, they're looking at Kevlars. They're really- there were a lot of things that I think he was very passionate about. And like you said, Congress, the Services, they don't always agree on what the priorities are. And so, I think it got- it was a tense time. But you'd hear some yelling from time to time. But yeah, I remember they were trying to figure out, hey, how do we get more protective equipment down range? How do we take better care of our military, our veterans? So, those were all like the topics du jour kind of when I was there. So, I didn't really get to see anything crazy, but I definitely overheard some shouting, some choice words.

(TI): Some choice words that you normally wouldn't hear as a captain-

(DH): Exactly.

(TI): Or as a staff sergeant and if you were somewhere else. Very good. You then became a consultant for DARPA. For those that know that don't know the acronym, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. As a child of the nineties, I played Metal Gear Solid, and that's probably how I knew the acronym. You had to rescue the DARPA chief. Anyways, how did you go from military liaison at the House Armed Services Committee to DARPA. Were you with a contractor?

(DH): Yeah. So, I did my, kind of, very informal internship on the Hill. And as I was getting ready to, sort of, finally go through my medical retirement and get all that squared away, it was great being on the Hill, but I sort of equate it to, okay I need a real job now. I actually really enjoyed my time. I learned a lot, but I also learned that I really wanted, I had no patience for politics. And so, I said, "Okay, well I need a real job." And actually, while I was recovering at the hospital, another gentleman that I had met, he's a retired, well, excuse me, he's retired now. He was an Army Colonel MD PhD, a brilliant guy, and he's a program manager at DARPA.

(TI): Wow.

(DH): And so, he came through the hospital, and he was talking to, some of the wounded warriors, myself included, kind of trying to glean some insights as to, "Hey, how can

DARPA support this mission? What are some of the things you guys need downrange?" And so, him and I kind of hit it off, and we started talking, and eventually he came back around. He was starting some programs, and he wanted me to be involved in them. And it was a real job that could afford me the ability to live in DC and all of that. So, I said, "Sure. Why not?" So, I went to work for him at DARPA as an independent contractor, which is kind of how I started my business. I mean, I had to set up an entity. So, I was this young naive captain, thought I could, "Oh, sure. I can start a business no problem." So, I'm just like, I had no clue what I was doing, jumping through all these hoops, getting registered. So, I can do business with the government and really just so I could work for him, which is what I wanted to do at DARPA.

(TI): So, you became an independent contractor for one person.

(DH): Yes.

(TI): So, for someone from DARPA. I mean, that's quite a client, that's quite a first client. I mean, when someone from DARPA- was he a GS worker? Was he a-

(DH): So, he was active duty military.

(TI): He was active duty military.

(DH): Yeah. So, he was active duty military. He was a program manager there. So, DARPA's really kind of a shell organization. I mean, they have very few government employees. They all run the offices and then they run the programs and then they have contractors supporting them. But I didn't-

(TI): So, it's like the premier advanced research-

(DH): Oh, absolutely.

(TI): In the government. So, that's got- that had to have been exciting. It was like, "Hey, can you give me a hand?"

(DH): It was very- yeah, it was very exciting. And I think I didn't even fully appreciate how exciting it was. I remember walking in on the first day, and at the time you think- this, so this was back in 2005, late 2005, early 2006. And one

of the big programs that they had was unmanned aerial vehicles.

(TI): Okay.

(DH): What we now know as UAS, right?

(TI): Yeah.

(DH): And so, to think that that wasn't even a thing yet. And DARPA was in the early stages of developing this. And now they're ubiquitous. They're fielded, they're part of our force- a huge part of our force. And so-

(TI): The Air Force has squadrons that are just dedicated to UAV.

(DH): Exactly. Yeah. And so, DARPA just, it's fascinating the things you learn about while you're there. And yeah. So, I was definitely excited, and it was a great opportunity.

(TI): So, other than UAV, what was the, probably the coolest unclass thing you can talk about that was like, "Yeah, I saw that in its advanced research phase."

(DH): One of the things that was pretty cool that they were working on while I was there was this- and I think they're using them to a certain extent- is these are these exoskeletons that basically kind of turn a person into a machine with superhuman powers and strength. And you can lift a lot, you can carry a lot, you can run fast, you can jump high. And so, those were pretty cool. They were called exoskeletons, and they were working on them.

(TI): You were seeing them before the viral YouTube videos of them.

(DH): Yes. Yes. Very early on.

(TI): Very cool. How did you close your career with DARPA? And it ended up being a business, an entrepreneur with- you got over 600 people working for you right now. How did that transition occur?

(DH): So, I actually, I stayed at DARPA- and matter of fact, DARPA is still a client. And so, I really was very focused the first few years on supporting Colonel Ling, was his name. And we did a lot of great things together. He did a

lot of, had a lot of great programs. I mean, he was the visionary, and there were a few other folks working for him. And we all just work together on these projects, but eventually it really afforded me the opportunity to get networked and to understand and learn, sort of, federal acquisition and how it works, and budgets, and procurement, and all of that. And so really-

(TI): Contract bidding.

(DH): Exactly. It really gave me some insights to how it works. And in the position I was in, I had a lot of networking opportunities and ended up having other people, not just Colonel Ling, who were saying, "Hey, can you help me with this project or with that project?" And so, really what happened was just very word of mouth, pretty much unintentional. I started to bring more projects on and were working. And so, I needed people to help me do it. So, I would reach out to my network and would hire somebody on as I brought in more work. And so, it just grew very slowly and organically. And then one day I kind of woke up and realized like, "Wait a minute, I think I have something here. Maybe I could grow this. Maybe it could become bigger." But really, I think the realization for me was like, there's a lot of interesting work to be done. There are a lot of hard problems that we need to solve and- but even more so, there's a lot of really smart people that want to work on this stuff and are passionate about the mission. And those were people I wanted to work with. And that really goes back to, I think, my time in service of really not wanting that to end. I really wanted to stay connected to the mission. That was just kind of what I knew. It was my sense of purpose. And I realized, like, there were a lot of other retiring military or wounded warriors that were getting out, careers were cut short and- or people just, they couldn't handle all the deployments. It was too hard on their family, so they decided to get out of the military. So, those were the people I wanted to hire. I wanted to bring people together to solve some of these problems. Or try to help overcome challenges. And so, that's really kind of when I turned the corner, a few years in and said, "Hey, there's something bigger here. And I think we can do more." And so, that's when I really started focusing on being- transitioning to be

more the CEO of the company versus just a consultant working on projects.

(TI): Very good. How many out of the 600 or so employees that you have- how many are veterans?

(DH): We've got about just over 30% veteran at the company. Yeah. So, which for us in the line of work that we're doing, we do a lot of just pretty complex sophisticated technology work. And it's not necessarily a field that aligns back to a specific MOS in the military. I mean, certainly there are a lot of gifted technical people in the military. So, we really work hard to try to hit that number and hire as many vets as we can.

(TI): So, wounded in 2004 and then founding your own company in 2006, that's some as some boom boom shakin' and bakin' you know? But the 2006 was actually just doing the independent contractor work that was kind of like the start of it. When did the growth kind of spurt? When was it like, "Hey, I think I got something." What year was that?

(DH): So, really about two years in when I had transitioned over to the CEO role, right around 2008, we had a company approach us saying, "Hey, we have a couple contracts that we're looking at, and we'd like your company to bid with us." And in fact-

(TI): As like, a subcontractor?

(DH): Well initially, it started out as a subcontracting relationship, but then one of the opportunities came out, and it was going to be a service-disabled veteran owned set aside opportunity. And so, they said, "Hey, we want you guys to prime it." Priming being the main company. "And we'll support you, and we're familiar with this work." And it was a pretty large contract for us. It was a \$20 million prime contract with U.S. Army Recruiting Command. And we were absolutely thrilled at the opportunity and we said, "Yeah, let's do it." And we ended up winning it. And that's what really kind of put the company on the map and really required us to kind of quickly start building out our infrastructure.

(TI): Very good, very good. Halfaker and Associates. It's a professional services and technology solutions firm. Does that mean you find the right tech for the customer's problem?

(DH): It does. I mean, I think ultimately, what we're really trying to do is leverage the technology, kind of, best practices and expertise that we have to solve problems. And so, we really look at the mission, we look at the opportunity, we look at the customer. And so, we make sure that we have that subject matter expertise, but you, even more so, we can back that up with the right kind of technology solution. Sometimes it's the solution, sometimes it's some expert people to do cyber work or whatever the case may be really across the spectrum of technology.

(TI): I was going to say, are we talking IT security, cloud management, logistics software, all of the above?

(DH): So, a little- all of the above. I mean, the core areas that we really focus on are ,kind of, application development, which these days, really is becoming, the government shifting to they don't want to own a lot of technology, and they're smart. They want to be more efficient. They want to use SaaS. And so, they don't want to own it. And so, what we do in many cases now is we are going out and finding, sort of, the cutting-edge technology, bringing it into the government, and providing those solutions. So, it ends up being more technology integration is a lot of what we've been doing lately. And with that, anytime you're bringing in technology, usually you have- it's posted in the cloud, it needs to be secure. So, we kind of bundle all those services together and create a comprehensive solution.

(TI): Gotcha. Just finding the right tools, the right training for the problem at hand.

(DH): Exactly.

(TI): Tracking. Are all your clients in contracts, are they all government like some DOD contractors? Or are they- or are you like an Amazon or a Microsoft? Just a very smaller version of those where you serve other businesses in the private sector?

(DH): No, we are a hundred percent government.

(TI): Okay. Gotcha. Very good. Now, 600 employees. People would think that's pretty good, but it's still classified as a small business. Matter of fact, you were recommended to me by Michelle Garner, otherwise known as GI, at the VA when we were talking about breaking down the VA's Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization. I had to write that down just to make sure I got the acronym of what OSDBU is 'cause you know the beltway loves its acronyms. And she talks you up, and they talk about you and Halfaker and Associates as a huge success story for OSDBU. And were you recently recognized by them as like a best performing veteran-owned small business in the area or something like that?

(DH): I don't know. I have a hard time keeping up with GI because she's doing so many great things, but I know that OSDBU right now is very focused on trying to figure out how do we continue to attract not only veteran entrepreneurs, but women veteran entrepreneurs into the space? Particularly at VA, how do we support women-owned businesses? So, we've sort of come together on that. And I think, we're- my company is very lucky to be able to support VA and its mission, which is kind of my personal passion. But I think it's also important that we continue to hopefully inspire other entrepreneurs as well, who want to come into that space and make sure that they have ample opportunity to be successful.

(TI): I was wondering, as an entrepreneur, what has that office done for you personally?

(DH): Yeah. So, when I was, to be honest, when I was first starting out, I relied heavily on the OSDBU. Each agency has an office of small business programs. They are there to promote, to support small businesses coming into the space and into the supply chain. And small business is, as you know, critical, not only to the nation, but to our federal government.

(TI): Every department has that? So like, VA, DOD, Agriculture?

(DH): Correct.

- (TI): Okay. So, I thought that was just a one thing that was like, for veterans.
- (DH): No.
- (TI): Very interesting.
- (DH): Yeah. So, this is definitely a government-wide initiative, but obviously, VA has a, sort of, a unique piece in that mission in that they have the rule of two where they're very focused on ensuring that they're bringing, veteran owned businesses, service-disabled veteran owned businesses, and woman owned businesses, kind of, into their vendor community to really ensure that they can provide- they can leverage those companies to get the services and everything they need to survive.
- (TI): So, if you're a veteran owned small business, how do you take advantage of the OSDBUs at each department in the government?
- (DH): Right. Yeah. So, coming into an OSDBU, really what you have an opportunity to do as a business is learn the agency. So, if you're interested, let's say in VA, you come, and you meet with a representative at the Small Business Office. And really what they can do is they can help you understand what is VA buying? How do they buy? Who are the other big companies that are working at VA? Who are the points of contact there? How do you get involved in these different programs that they offer? What are the opportunities that are coming out? What are the contract vehicles the VA uses to buy? So, all these things. They really ensure that you have the information, the resources that you need to understand how to do business at that particular agency.
- (TI): If you're a private business, and you've known nothing when it comes to government, do they help you in like, "Hey, this is what a contract is. This is what a bid is. This is how you do that type of thing?"
- (DH): Yeah. I think the OSDBUs, they can help a little bit, but there's also some resources called PTACs, which are Procurement Technical Assistance Centers. And so, the OSDBUs work with those organizations and probably refer you there to get some kind of one-on-one training

and things like that. Every now and then, an OSDBU will do some training, but really, I think they rely more on the SBA has resources for that, the PTACs. And so, those were all resources that I used when I was starting my business. And a lot of that, again, the OSDBUs are a wealth of information. So, when you go in, they're able to refer you out to other organizations that can help you.

(TI): They're going to point you in the right direction.

(DH): Exactly.

(TI): Gotcha. Tracking. Talking VA, you are also the Secretary of Veteran Affairs Committee for OIF and OEF Soldiers and Families. Was that a full-time role? Was that a part-time role?

(DH): Yeah. So, this board was stood up probably back in 2006. I want to make sure I get my dates right. 2005-2006 timeframe.

(TI): So, the same time you're starting your company.

(DH): About the same time under Secretary Nicholson.

(TI): A little side work.

(DH): A little side work. Well, yeah. And so, the advisory board was- it was not full-time at all. And it was one of many advisory boards at the VA, but this one in particular, I think, was interesting because it really- we had some great leadership. Secretary Nicholson commissioned this. And actually, I met him at an event, and he was standing up this advisory board and we met very, very briefly. But he looked at me, and he's like, "I want you on my advisory board." And so, he threw my name in kind of last minute, and I ended up get getting on this advisory board. But it really- a lot of times, you hear about these advisory boards, and you kind of just assume they're these reports that get generated that nobody reads and all that. But this board was a little bit different, and it was a very active board. General Barno was the chair, and he, I think, really did an outstanding job at ensuring that this wasn't going to be one of those advisory boards. And so, we ended up getting to travel around the country, really get to know the VA kind of inside and out, and really looking at it from the perspective of, okay, we have this influx of OIF and OEF

veterans coming back. They're injured, they're going through the military health system. Okay. What do we need to do as VA to be able to support them? And the VA wasn't ready. I don't think that's any secret.

(TI): I don't think that was a secret at all. And it's easily- it's fair to say that.

(DH): Yeah. And the VA knew it, right? And so, I think that's why the advisory board really had an opportunity to say, "Hey, here's what we need to improve. Here's what we need to do. Here's the gaps." And make some of those kinds of recommendations.

(TI): So, you were there right when the VA realized, "Oh, we need help." I mean, that's a very pivotal time. You were there right when everyone really started coming back and needed the services. What were some of the things that you guys found?

(DH): So, some of the big things, I think, that we found was really, I think, the need for just more coordination across the VA, right? So, we had veterans coming back, and they were getting kind of lost in the system.

(TI): Yeah.

(DH): There's different entry points, as you know, as to how veterans sort of seek out the VA or find out about the VA or where they are in their transition. And so, as they come into the VA system, really, it was clear that there were some gaps in terms of the VA has all these amazing resources, but they weren't getting to the veterans necessarily. And so, veterans were coming back and just sort of getting lost in the system a little bit. And so, I think that VA, for example, stood up the Veteran Experience Office, right, and things like that. So, the VA was really getting in tune with, "Okay. Where are these gaps and how do we fix them?" And so, I think that they did that. Another huge thing that the VA did was they stood up the women's clinics. And so, I actually remember going into the DC VA, and there were, I don't even remember if there was a female restroom. I think there was, but it was like, there was only one, and it was one bathroom that they had set aside and made into a women's bathroom. And that was the extent of support for our women

veterans. And we were coming back, and all of a sudden it was like, "Oh, our population isn't just males." And so, they really-

(TI): Yeah.

(DH): I think the VA did a great job figuring that out reasonably quickly and then starting to kind of retrofit their hospitals and their clinics to accommodate women veterans and really set aside a specific area where we can go in and kind of get the services that we're required to get.

(TI): And now there's even a Center for Women Veterans here at the VA. Was that a thing when you were there?

(DH): That wasn't a thing when I, not when I was first there, but that was one of the big recommendations that came through, and the VA really picked up and ran with it. We also see things like caregiver support and just all these different initiatives. I think the VA's recognizing, as we look at veterans, we look at these, kind of, the next generation of veterans and what do we look like, what our families look like, and how can the VA sort of evolve to support and provide care?

(TI): Very good. Like I said, you've served on many boards. I think I counted six in your bio. Most notably, Chairman of the Board for Wounded Warrior Project. And as a member of the USO Board of Governors, how does someone become a nonprofit board member?

[Laughter]

(DH): That's a good question. I don't know.

(TI): Is it like you get on one, and they see you do good work and then-

(DH): You get on the circuit, as they say. Yeah, no, I actually- do you want me to tell the quick story about Wounded Warrior Project?

(TI): Sure.

(DH): So, this is how I got on the Wounded Warrior Board, and I think it was probably the first board I was on. And not that I'm a prolific board member by any means, but I, as you pointed out, I'm on a couple.

(TI): At this point, it was probably just very young, too.

(DH): Very young, very young. And so, it was, yeah, it was kind of questionable, their judgment, to bring somebody like me on. However, this is interesting. This is kind of a good story. So, they- Wounded Warrior was a fairly new organization. And initially what they were doing was they were bringing backpacks into the hospitals and passing them out. And these backpacks had sort of your everyday items in them. So, if you can imagine you come off the battlefield, you have nothing. I mean, you're medivac-ed in a hospital gown. All of your belongings are left behind. You don't have a toothbrush, you don't, you have nothing, right. And so, what they recognize is that service members-

(TI): I didn't even think of that.

(DH): Were then- we're stuck at Walter Reed and like, you don't have clean underwear, you know? And so, they started filling these backpacks with kind of like, your everyday comfort items: underwear, like socks, like just basic stuff, right? Toiletries-

(TI): Toothpaste, yeah.

(DH): Toothpaste, hairbrush, right? However, the organization is, you may or may not know, was started by a couple of gentlemen, one of which who's a Marine, right? Men, males. And so, when I got my backpack, they were awesome. They came to my room, they gave me the backpack and it was like, it had like, men's underwear in it. It had all stuff for men.

[Laughter]

(TI): Oh man!

(DH): And so, I literally look at them, and I was just kind of like, "This is really nice, guys. But like, what the hell am I gonna do with this?" No, and they were great sports about it. They laughed, and we laughed- we had a laugh, and they're like, "Hey, well like, you're right. We need your help. Can you come join us? Can you help us?" And so, I ended up joining their board. They were smaller at the time.

(TI): All over men's underwear.

(DH): All over men's underwear, yeah. And so, that's how you join boards. You just- it's men's underwear.

(TI): Very good. Are those full-time or part-time gigs? What does that-

(DH): I would say they're very part-time. These boards usually meet quarterly. And there's some things that are done in between if you're on a committee. But yeah, it's, I mean, some of them can be more work than others. But it's, quite frankly, for me, it's a lot of fun. You get to be a part of these different, unique missions that are supporting veterans, military, and it's just- it's really fulfilling. So, it doesn't feel like work.

(TI): Very good. Very good. What's one thing that you've learned in your military that you apply to what you do today.

(DH): I think the biggest thing that I kind of brought from the military is really- the, the military is an amazing institution because it's so diverse. I mean, you have the best cross section of our country and even- you know, you get to interact with a lot of foreign militaries as well. But you get this cross section of people from all different walks of life, and you have one mission. And you somehow, as a leader in the military, you got to get everybody on the same page to perform that mission, and failure's not an option. And so, I think that that mentality of, being able to kind of play the hand you're dealt, and inspire people, bring them together and train them and be trained, right. And really just work as a part of a team that's extremely diverse to accomplish something like there's just nothing better than that. And that's really what I do in my job every day is try to find really interesting, smart, talented people that have the same mindset and the same vision of, "Hey, I want to, I want to serve, I want to be a part of something bigger than myself. And, I want to work towards something and work with a team to accomplish it. And that's really what I get to do every day. And it's probably the best thing about my job is just all the cool people I get to work with.

(TI): Outstanding. Dawn, we've covered a lot of ground. Kind of gone everywhere in your whole career a little bit. Is there anything that I've missed, or I haven't asked that you'd like to share?

(DH): Yeah, I think I'll just leave with the fact that, the thing that I've come to realize being involved- we talked about some of the nonprofit work that I've been privileged to be a part of, being able to support the VA, my business supports the VA, the military as well is just how many resources there are out there for veterans and how many people care. I think that there's a lot of talk about civil-military divide and things like that, but there's some really good news stories out there of, everyday people, VA employees, whoever, that are working really hard to support our veterans. And there's a lot of great programs out there that they can- veterans can take advantage of. And they can be really helpful whether you want to be, an entrepreneur, or you want to go back to school and get a degree, whatever your goals are. I think that there really is support out there. So, I just encourage everybody to check it out. A lot of stuff on the VA website, <https://www.va.gov/> and just a lot of great nonprofits out there that are ready support and certainly I'd love to help and support any veteran that needs it.

[00:54:07] Outro:

Tanner Iskra: I want to thank Dawn for her time and for coming on Borne the Battle. You can read more about Dawn at halfaker.com [Link: www.halfaker.com]. That's half, H-A-L-F-A-K-E-R, halfaker.com/halfaker/dawn- halfaker. This week's Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week is from our VA Veteran of the Day program. Every day, a veteran is highlighted by our digital team with a blog on blogs.va.gov and with a post on our social media platforms [Link: blogs.va.gov/VAntage/category/veteran]. You can submit your own Veteran of the Day by sending a short writeup and a couple of photos to newmedia@va.gov. And just let them know that you want them as the Veteran of the Day. Centra "Cece" Mazyck grew up in a military family. Her mother, uncles, and brother all served in the military. She was born in Charleston, South Carolina, and she lived in New York City while her mother was stationed there, then moved back to St. Stephen, South Carolina where she attended

high school. It's the life of a military child, I'll tell you. In August of 1994, she attended basic training at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina. There, she completed training as a human resource manager. In 1997, Mazyck transitioned into active duty with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. She achieved the rank of Sergeant first class within her first two enlistments within eight years. E-7, pretty impressive. While jumping out of the C-130, she and another jumper became entangled in their parachutes at a high altitude and were unable to weave out in time. Upon landing, she burst her L1 and L2 vertebrae becoming paralyzed from the waist down. After undergoing rehabilitation and physical therapy, she was released from the hospital in 2004. Mazyck moved back to Columbia and returned to school. She graduated in 2010 with a Sociology degree from the University of South Carolina. Mazyck is also a Paralympian. In 2005, she competed in the first National Veterans Wheelchair Games. Later, after intense training, after intense training, she competed in the javelin competition at the 2012 Paralympic Games in London. In 2013, she earned a bronze medal at the IPC Athletic World Championships in France. Mazyck now shares her inspiring story around the world as a motivational speaker. She is also an ambassador for the Disabled American Veterans and earned the DAV Freedom Award. Army veteran Centra "Cece" Myzack. Thank you for your service. That's it for this week's episode. If you yourself would like to nominate a Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week, you can just send an email to podcast@va.gov. Include a short writeup, and let us know why you'd like to see him or her as the Borne the Battle Veteran of the Week. And if you like this podcast episode, hit the subscribe button. We're on Apple Podcasts, iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcast, iHeartRadio, pretty much any podcasting app on a phone, computer, tablet, or man. For more stories on veterans and veteran benefits, check out our website, blogs.va.gov [Link: <https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>]. And follow the VA on social media, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube RallyPoint, LinkedIn—we got the Pinterest—D-P-T Vet Affairs, US Department of Veterans Affairs. No matter the social media, you can always find us with that blue check mark. And as always, I'm reminded by people smarter than me to remind you that the Department of Veteran Affairs does not endorse or officially sanction any entities

that may be discussed in this podcast nor any media products or services they may provide. I say that because the song you're hearing now is called "Machine Gunner," which is courtesy of the non-profit Operations Song and was written by Marine veteran Mick McElhenny, Nashville songwriter Jason Sever and Mykal Duncan. Thank you again for listening. Please tell all your veteran friends that this is a thing, and we'll see you right here next week. Take care.

[00:58:34] Music

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